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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 003393

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PROP](#) [SNAR](#) [MOPS](#) [ASEC](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN ARMY ATTACK ON POLICE UNIT SPARKS
CONTROVERSY

CLASSIFIED BY: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The deaths on March 19 of eleven people -- seven anti-kidnapping police and four civilians -- at the hands of the Colombian Army (COLAR) in Narino department has sparked controversy. The Colombian National Police (CNP) and Army have presented contradictory accounts of the incident, and President Uribe has asked the Ministry of Defense (MOD) to present him with a consensus account by April 2. Over the past week, the press has focused on inconsistencies in the COLAR and CNP accounts of the incident, as well as on disagreements between the two security services. To provide closure, at the very least the MOD's report would have to clarify whether: 1) the CNP were clearly identifiable as police; 2) they were authorized to operate in the area; 3) the COLAR was operating on credible intelligence and acted responsibly; and 4) the COLAR appropriately handled the investigation immediately following the incident and did not attempt a cover-up. Such a short-fuse report may not adequately address these and other questions, but the answers must eventually be found if the COLAR and CNP are to work together effectively. End Summary.

The "Incident"

2. (U) On the night of March 19, in what is being variously described as an ambush, an execution, or a friendly fire accident, the Colombian Army (COLAR) killed eleven people in a police convoy in the municipality of Guaitarilla, Narino department. The victims, who included four civilians and seven members of a Colombian National Police's (CNP) Anti-Kidnapping Group (GAULAs), were traveling along a rural highway in an area with a heavy presence of illegal armed groups when they were fired on by about forty COLAR forces from the Third Division's Boyaca Battalion. All eleven passengers were killed; COLAR forces suffered no casualties.

3. (C/NF) The incident has sparked controversy and confusion both publicly and within the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Initially, the COLAR and the CNP publicly offered markedly different accounts of the incident, and the President (who was in Washington, DC at the time) prohibited both institutions from commenting further in public. Compounding difficulties the GOC faces in investigating an incident that occurred in largely hostile territory, no local eyewitnesses to the event have been identified. Although the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia") is conducting an investigation, President Uribe has demanded that the MOD submit its own internal report on the incident by April 2, in which the COLAR and CNP reach consensus on what occurred. Uribe clearly hopes the report will put an end to public speculation.

Conflicting Accounts

4. (C/NF) The COLAR claims its actions were based on intelligence about ongoing narcotics trafficking activities in the area. According to the COLAR, its forces attacked vehicles carrying individuals in camouflage uniforms armed with revolvers. Armed Forces Commander General Carlos Alberto Ospina and Army Commander General Martin Orlando Carreno have commented that the GAULA members' presence late at night on

a rural road is suspicious, and Carreno has taken no administrative action against the COLAR members involved in the incident, pending an investigation.

15. (S/NF) The CNP, on the other hand, claims its troops were involved in an approved anti-extortion operation, and were accompanied by at least one civilian informant and two or more civilian detainees. According to the CNP, its troops were on their way to Pasto, capital of Narino department, to process the detainees when they were attacked. Money the COLAR found in the vehicles was being used by the informants as part of a sting operation. Contrary to COLAR reporting, the CNP says its members were wearing standard issue police uniforms and carrying rifles. The CNP also alleges that the COLAR cordoned off the area after the incident and, rather than immediately informing the CNP about the tragedy, publicly announced a successful operation against paramilitaries and only told the CNP about its officers' deaths the following day. Upon learning of the incident, the CNP Deputy Director asked that the COLAR wait for the Prosecutor General's Office to arrive before tampering with the scene. According to CNP sources, the COLAR ignored this request and instead flew the bodies back to Pasto in helicopters, where they were delivered to the victims' families. The source goes on to say that all of the victims' clothing and jewelry were missing, except for one GAULA hat left in a vehicle.

Inconsistencies

16. (C/NF) In trying to piece together the incident, GOC investigators and the press have uncovered many inconsistent, suspicious, and/or confusing details.

-- (U) The Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) says the bodies appear to have been tampered with. In addition, ten bodies were found on the ground outside their vehicles and shot at point-blank range, suggesting they were not killed in an ambush, as the COLAR claims.

-- (U) The CNP claims the GAULAs had authorization from CNP leadership in Bogota to travel through the area. However, the military was apparently not notified. Some observers find it suspicious that such a small number of police would be traveling on official business on a rural road in the middle of the night in an area with a large presence of illegal armed groups. At the very least, it is clear that the CNP and COLAR did not adequately coordinate operations.

-- (U) The GAULAs were not accompanied by a prosecutor and were operating outside a metropolitan area, both of which violate regulations for local GAULA units. The CNP has explained away this concern by asserting that four of the officers were assigned to the national unit.

-- (C/NF) Two alleged police survivors of the incident have come forward, contradicting the first military justice official to arrive on the scene, who claimed there were no survivors. According to the first of these, the GAULAs were in the area conducting an anti-drug trafficking operation. If this were the case, it would explain COLAR reports that drugs were found in the vehicles, but simultaneously raises questions about why the GAULAs -- an anti-kidnapping and anti-extortion unit -- were conducting an anti-narcotics operation. However, serious questions have been raised about this individual's credibility, and some reports now claim he is actually a police informant who came forward two days after the incident with a bullet wound that doctors determined was received just hours earlier.

-- (U) According to press reports, a second alleged survivor, who is reportedly entering the Prosecutor General's witness protection program, claims the 11 persons were murdered after exiting their vehicles and conversing with COLAR forces. This witness claims he exited one of the vehicles and hid in the underbrush when he noticed a suspicious roadblock ahead. From there, he made two cell phone calls to his brother, one of the civilian informants in the groups, who said the GAULAs were arguing with the soldiers about turning over their weapons. Shortly thereafter, he heard shots and could no longer communicate with his brother. The credibility of this witness has yet to be determined.

Comment

17. (C) It is important that the GOC resolve this incident as soon as possible in order to minimize the damage already caused to traditionally strained relations between the CNP and the COLAR. The MOD's report to the President may adequately explain what happened on the night of March 19. However, given the short timeframe for delivery of the report and the complicated nature of the incident, this is unlikely.

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